



Encouraging Parents in Education

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

As we struggle to make our K-12 education system more effective, there is no shortage of suggestions on what – and how – to improve. Some say the key to improvement is better-paid or better-trained teachers. Others think that our schools need more financial resources, or an improved curriculum. Many believe that a strong school principal can make the difference between a mediocre teaching climate or a robust learning environment for our school children.

We always look to government to take these steps, but the most important factor in a child's academic success may well be difficult for government to influence: the student's family setting, particularly the degree of parental involvement in a child's education.

Without a doubt, children whose parents take an active role in their education are far more likely to succeed in school than the children whose parents do not. No teacher, counselor, principal or governmental program can provide a substitute for the loving interest of an actively engaged parent.

In my view, primary education should be the responsibility of families and local school boards, first. The further away we get from local control of education, especially when influence reaches the federal level, the more opportunity for mischief is created.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) has been criticized for intruding on local control of education. The law establishes accountability measurements for our local schools, so we can tell how much progress we're making. It also attempts to encourage more rigorous content and achievement goals for all students.

We must address those criticisms when NCLB is up for renewal next year. In the meantime, Congress and the Education Department must continue working to ensure that local control is maintained, even as we seek better results for our children nationwide.

Another key to successful education is to encourage parental involvement and support in local education. I've been involved in attempting to strengthen these provisions of our education policy.

Currently, students in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least three years are eligible to receive supplemental educational services, which includes tutoring and summer school classes. In addition, some eligible students are allowed to transfer from their low-performing school to a new school.

We now know that many parents in Texas and America are not aware of these opportunities for

their children. In most cases, the key to triggering these provisions is for the parent to request them from their school district.

With Sen. Mel Martinez of Florida, I recently introduced a proposed law, the Raising Achievements through Improving Supplemental Education (RAISE) Act. It's a measure to strengthen a school's ability to embrace and allow children to more frequently take advantage of the benefits provided in current law.

Unfortunately, the legislation is badly needed in some areas. Authorities have documented extreme cases of schools failing to provide adequate notification for parents about the supplemental services that should be offered, such as tutoring or school choice.

The RAISE Act would help school districts better implement supplemental education programs and serve more students. It would also ensure that parents are properly notified about their options when their children's schools aren't making the grade.

The Administration and Congress must continue to emphasize and encourage parental participation in their children's educational process. In Texas, state legislators are working on the same goals.

But government can only do so much. In the final account, parents must get involved and make certain their children can take advantage of the school resources and improvement opportunities required under the law. I encourage all parents who believe their children may be eligible for these services to contact their school districts for more information.

It's a truism that our children are our nation's most valuable resource. I will continue working with my colleagues at the federal level to help local school districts prepare our young people for achievement and success. We will surely succeed together, with parents who are there to encourage and challenge their children.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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